

HEARING VOICES

“Listen,” says God, “and hear my voice; pay attention, and hear my speech” (Is 28.23).

It’s one of those verses that inevitably has one asking if it is to be taken seriously. Isn’t God’s speaking to people something that occurred only back in Bible times? Hasn’t all of that dried up and disappeared? Actually, no. Can God really be expected, then, to speak directly to us? Actually, yes.

Modern psychology takes for granted the fact that all people hear “voices” emanating from within--“self-talk,” it is said to be. One of these voices belongs to God, who, now hundreds of generations after early Biblical days, goes on communicating with people.

In short, it is the province of all persons to be hearing voices and, in one way or another, to be influenced by them. It is the very nature of our inner lives.

As you no doubt know, on our recent vacation, Hue and I visited Ireland. My idea of a good vacation is to fly someplace, pick up a rental car, be sure that there’s an “unlimited mileage” clause in the rental contract, and then have nothing in front except the adventure of the open highway.

Where it comes to Ireland, of course, there is one small wrinkle that has to be negotiated. And that has to do with the fact that all that unlimited mileage has to be done by driving on the “wrong side” of the highway, from the “wrong side” of the car.

Admittedly, it takes some getting used to all that traffic whizzing at you from the right lane, around an assortment of blind corners. Especially challenging, however, is the experience of the myriad so-called “roundabouts” that one encounters everywhere.

You see, there is almost no such thing as an actual intersection--where two roads cross, and where vehicle flow there is simply controlled by a traffic signal. No, in Ireland, where two principal roads cross, there is typically one of these roundabouts, a circular traffic pattern, with the various next-turn choices running off like so many spokes from the center of a wheel, and with all the cars, trucks, and busses taking their exits of choice off this traffic circle while moving in a clockwise fashion--exactly opposite, of course, the way that we would move here in the U.S.

It was in the course of just one of these challenging roundabouts that a most remarkable thing was observed. As I approached it, preparing to take my turn entering the moving circle of traffic, I heard a clear, emphatic voice from within. The voice said, “Look to the right. Move to the left.”

“Look to the right.” That’s where, in Ireland, the oncoming traffic is coming from. Entering the roundabout while looking off to the left (as we would do here) is a good way there to get “T-boned.”

“Move to the left.” That’s the direction that all the rest of the traffic is moving. Moving to the right is to be the salmon swimming upstream against the tide of many angry drivers coming directly at you.

“Look to the right. Move to the left.” Timely, succinct, sound guidance. Understand, no one in the car had said a thing, but I heard the voice . . . and I recognized the voice as being distinctly Hue’s.

You see, I had heard this cautionary directive uttered from her countless times over the earlier days of our

driving-around. I'm not sure if it was offered to be of genuine assistance to me, or just to control her own jangled nerves. It was augmented by other such messages like: "Slow down. This road is too narrow. Slow down. Watch the sharp curve ahead. Slow down. Be careful of the bus. And (have I mentioned?) slow down."

These messages had not only been heard but had also indelibly left their memory traces. I had internalized the voice, so that when I encountered the next risky driving maneuver, it was automatically triggered in my mind, rather instinctively replayed to address the immediate situation at hand.

"Look to the right; move to the left." Countless times, Hue had audibly voiced the directive, and now she no longer needed to. I was so familiar with the guidance that it was now a permanent part of my own self-talk.

If we listen carefully to ourselves, we discover that human consciousness is filled with just this sort of self-talk that goes on all the time.

Some of that self-talk originates in things that other people have said to us, part of which is very good and helpful, part of which is actually quite damaging to us. And some of that self-talk originates from within one's inner life, messages from the deeper recesses of the soul to the ego.

In either case, the phenomenon of these internal voices is to be associated with something in Scripture. You heard it this morning as part of what was read from John's gospel. It concerns Jesus' ongoing relationship with those who are genuinely his followers-- especially that distinctive quality of those who "hear his voice" (Jn 10.3a).

"He calls his own sheep by name," says the gospel, "and leads them out . . . and the sheep follow him because they know his voice" (10.3b,4b).

Authentic disciples recognize--distinct from all the other voices that are part of their psyche--the voice that belongs to Jesus. They know it because of the previous religious instruction they have received. They know it because of hymns sung and sermons preached and Bible passages read. It's all been inevitably introjected and personified, which affords face and personality to the spiritual reality of the Divine which rests quietly in the depths of each individual.

In short, God is still speaking, from within the heart of all humanity. That voice, in fact, has never ceased speaking, although it does at times get drowned out by the many other louder voices that are ranting and raging within us. God, you see, doesn't shout.

The voice of Jesus is one of the softer voices within. If we're going to hear it, we're going to have to be listening more carefully for it, and we're going to have to be adjusting its volume a bit.

"I am the good shepherd," Jesus says of himself. "I know my own, and my own know me" (10.14). That is to say, when I speak to them, they recognize my voice.

That being so, how well do you know that shepherd?

How keenly are you acquainted with that voice within yourself?

Are you listening for it, and, if you do have that focus correct, have you got the volume at the right level?

Everyone hears voices.

Which are the ones to which we're attending?